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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether the Ghanaian press sets the public agenda in Ghana, and whether Ghanaian elites show a greater agenda-setting effect than non-elites. An analysis of 1,585 subjects was conducted. Respondents were interviewed by teachers and students in teachers' training colleges. The construct of elitism was determined by measuring six variables, including political knowledge, education, and mobility. Newspaper reading was measured at three levels: (1) those who read the specific newspaper that the study analyzed, (2) those who read other newspapers, and (3) those who did not read newspapers. The results showed that the Ghanaian media do set the national agenda in Ghana and that factors related to elitism in Ghana are positively associated with agenda setting. Even non-elites showed correlations between their issue priorities and media issue emphasis. The results suggest that newspapers in Ghana may be successful in bringing about national consensus concerning the most crucial national problems in need of attention. (DF)

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NEWSPAPER AGENDA-SETTING AMONG ELITES AND NON-ELITES IN GHANA

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NEWSPAPER AGENDA-SETTING AMONG ELITES AND NON-ELITES IN GHANA

Research on the agenda-setting function of the press, which proposes that the issue priorities of the mass media will be transferred to the public and subsequently become the aggregate issue priorities of the public, has received at least modest support since the seminal study by McCombs and Shaw.¹ While many subsequent agenda-setting studies failed to attain statistical significance, there appears to be a consistent, though sometimes low, correlational agreement between media issue emphasis and public issue emphasis as to the most vital issues.² At present agenda-setting remains a hypothesis or little more than an empirical generalization striving to become a theory. One test of a good theory that has yet to be applied to the agenda-setting function of the press is whether the hypothesis can be generalized to other situations.³ Although agenda-setting research has been conducted primarily in the United States, the hypothesis has also been tested in such developed societies as Canada,⁴ Denmark,⁵ Australia,⁶ Israel,⁷ and Sweden.⁸ The present study investigated this hypothesis in Ghana, a developing African nation where such factors as literacy, education, political knowledge, income, mobility, and media use can be crucial when examining media effects. All these variables are positively associated with level of elitism.

While applying this theoretical approach in a developing nation may have important theoretical implications, such an application may also have important practical implications relating to a vital concern among many scholars of international communications -- whether mass

communication can serve as an agent for modernization or a stimulus to
the development process.⁹ Also, as many nations develop mass media,
it is vital to understand the effect of mass media on society.

Agenda-setting research has progressed to a stage of "normal
science," where researchers are no longer content to merely replicate
the effect. Rather, researchers are now attempting to locate those
"contingent conditions" that may enhance or mediate the effect.¹⁰
Researchers have found that direct experience with issues in the news
may be an important factor mediating the agenda-setting impact of the
mass media.¹¹ Direct experience with issues, it is argued, is
associated with less reliance on mass media for cognitions about
society.¹² On the other hand, dependence on mass media for
information about issues in a world beyond one's immediate environment
has been found to enhance agenda-setting because the public has little
or no access to interpersonal sources or direct experience with issues
and they are reliant on mass media for their information about and
cognitions of the issues.¹³

De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach observed that media dependency is
associated with the structural effects of a society.¹⁴ They developed
their theory based on the sociological writings of Tonnies and
Durkheim who hypothesized that as society grows more complex members
of society develop specialized skills for their roles in a society
that values specialization.¹⁵ Tonnies made his observations during
the early part of the industrial revolution in his native Germany when
he was witnessing Germany in transition between a traditional society
and an urban-industrial society. It has been asserted that many
developing societies today are undergoing a similar--though not
directly analogous--transition. As a result of the specialized

subculture that develops in a heterogeneous society, replete with values, beliefs, and a jargon of their own, individuals of different subgroups become less capable of communicating with others outside their particular groups. Interpersonal discussion decreases and individuals become more reliant upon mass media for information needed to participate in the general society. In Western nations it is taken for granted that much of what people know about issues outside their immediate environment is learned through the mass media. Lippmann first made this observation more than 50 years ago when he observed that the then-developing mass media were creating similar pictures in the heads of all individuals in American society.¹⁶ The shared "pictures in our heads" is what Lippmann referred to as public opinion. Thus the "power of the press" in most Western nations is this ability to set the aggregate public "agenda" in an urban-industrial society.

If indeed mass media agenda-setting increases as society grows more complex, then it is not surprising that modern industrialized societies should display an aggregate agenda-setting effect. Mass media have become ubiquitous in urban-industrial societies. Since many developing societies are seeking to modernize, and as a byproduct of modernization develop mass media, there is a temptation to suggest that their societies will grow more reliant upon mass media and hence display a greater aggregate agenda-setting effect. But as some development researchers have observed, developing nations today are not developing along the line of Europe and America during their industrial revolutions.¹⁷ They exist side by side in a world with highly developed nations. Members of such societies are aware of what

is occurring in the developed nations. Many of their most elite citizens have been educated abroad for the purpose of diffusing knowledge from the industrialized societies into their own nations. As a result, many developing societies today are structured on a two-tier level, with a small relatively well-to-do elite sector and a traditional rural sector.¹⁸ Such a society, displaying characteristics of both a traditional society and an urban-industrial society, is not likely to display an aggregate media agenda-setting effect such as it has occurred in the West.

We entered this study realizing that fundamental notions of media effects in an urban-industrial society may not be directly applicable in traditional societies. But if a theory is to be useful it must be fully understood. Underlying the agenda-setting effect may be the crucial variables of "urban-industrial" and "traditional." The traditional and urban-industrial variables refer to the state of economic and social development of a society. Agenda-setting is a largely societal, rather than individual effect, since most of the research has been analyzed by examining the relationship between aggregate media and public data.¹⁹ No research that we are aware of has directly tested agenda-setting in a traditional society, where the general public may not need to rely on mass media for information and where mass media may not be ubiquitous. Such a study would permit us to better understand how the agenda-setting process works at the societal level.

We also entered this study assuming that elites in developing societies have been exposed to values from an urban-industrial society and at least to some extent they have adopted these values and therefore have an interest in a world beyond

their immediate environments, and since they have been exposed to mass media and have learned the value of mass media, may be more dependent upon mass media than others in their societies and therefore more susceptible to the agenda-setting effect. Previous research that examined the relationship between aggregate audience media exposure or use with political knowledge in developing nations has found mixed results. McLeod, Rush, and Friederich found a .243 correlation between indices of media exposure and political knowledge in Quito,²⁰ Ecuador. The relationship, however, was substantially reduced by socioeconomic control. As a result, they conceded that many of their correlational findings may have been in part or totally a function of socioeconomic factors. Chaffee and Izcaray tested the agenda-setting hypothesis in a large, "media-rich" city in Venezuela and found little²¹ support for the hypothesis.

These few studies that examined the relationship between media exposure and knowledge in the Third World were conducted in urban, cosmopolitan centers, those sectors of the nations most likely to display characteristics of an urban-industrial society. Even within a developing society there are an array of socioeconomic and media-use factors that may enhance or mediate the mass media's ability to transfer their issue priorities to the audience. In many developing societies, the relationship between education and upward mobility is strongly pronounced because of the emphasis that modernizing societies place on achievement. To acquire education is also to be "resocialized" or "synchronized" into a modern, Western orientation in which achievement and universal rational criteria tend to displace²² traditional norms. Because Third World elites are "synchronized"

into Western cultures, they may become more dependent on Western-style institutions, including the mass media, for their information about the social environment than non-elites in their countries. In Africa, in particular, daily newspapers are likely to appeal to an elite audience. Martin has observed that Africa has by far the smallest daily newspaper circulation in proportion to its population than other regions of the world.²³ He suggested that because of Africa's unique social and economic development, newspapers may never become a dominant medium for news on the continent. Nevertheless, in their efforts to bring about cultural integration, Martin noted that the lingua franca of most African dailies are English, French, or Portugese, the languages of the colonialists.²⁴ But most Africans are only literate in their tribal languages, if they are literate at all. Martin estimated that fewer than 10 percent of Africans even speak a European language.²⁵ Thus, there is a great social and cultural gap between elites and non-elites in Africa.

As a result of the above discussion, the present study tested two hypotheses:

H1: The Ghanaian press sets the public agenda in Ghana.

H2: Ghanaian elites show a greater agenda-setting effect than non-elites.

METHOD

To test the hypotheses, a secondary analysis of 1,585 respondents in six communities in Ghana's Central Region was examined. The UNESCO commissioned study, conducted by the University of Ghana's School of Journalism and Communication in Legon, was originally

conducted to examine the feasibility of setting up mass media in the Central Region. The respondents were interviewed from August 13 to August 20, 1981. The Central Region was chosen because its population displayed a wide array of socioeconomic characteristics that are related to elitism. The communities included commerical towns, fishing towns, and farming towns. A list of all the houses was created and a skip interval of every third house was selected in Ajumako, Apam, Besease, Kwanyarku, Mankwadze, and Agona Swedru. Interviewers were instructed to interview the male and female head of each household if possible. The response rate was over 90 percent.²⁶ The communities surveyed ranged in population from 1,000 to 21,000. The respondents were personally interviewed by teachers and students in teachers' training colleges in the Central Region. All interviewers received three days of intensive training in interviewing techniques.

Each respondent was asked a battery of demographic and media-use questions to determine his or her level of elitism. The construct of elitism was determined by measuring six variables: 1) newspaper reading, 2) political knowledge, 3) political participation, 4) literacy, 5) education, and 6) mobility. These variables have been found to correlate highly with elitism in Ghana.²⁷

Newspaper reading was measured at three levels: 1) those who read the specific newspaper analyzed in this study (the medium-specific measure), 2) those who read other newspapers (readers), and 3) those who did not read newspapers, either because they didn't want to, they couldn't afford them, the newspapers were not available to them, or they were illiterate (non-readers). Political knowledge was measured dichotomously (yes/no) by asking respondents to name the

member of Parliament representing their area. Political participation was also measured dichotomously by asking respondents whether they were registered to vote. Literacy was measured dichotomously, based on the respondent's ability to read English, the official language of Ghana and the language of Ghana's daily newspapers. Education was also measured dichotomously, as those who had formal schooling of any amount and those who had no formal schooling. Mobility was measured at three levels: 1) those who traveled one or more times a week outside of their communities, 2) those who traveled less than once a week but more than once a month outside their communities, and 3) those who traveled outside their communities less than once a month.

To measure aggregate audience issue priorities, the dependent variable in this study, each respondent was asked an open-ended question concerning what was the most important problem facing Ghana. The responses to this question were subsequently rank ordered based on the proportion of responses cited for each problem. This form of question is similar to the questions used in agenda-setting studies in the United States which ask audience members to project their intrapersonal agenda on the global concept of the nation.²⁸ The responses to this question were coded into six categories: 1) national unity, which involves ethnic strife and the lack of support for government institutions; 2) kalabuie, the local jargon for economic crimes and problems such as the high cost of living, hoarding goods, racketeering and selling essential commodities above government-controlled prices, and corruption;²⁹ 3) weak government, which involves ineffective leadership in government and institutions such as the civil services and the military; 4) foreign dependence,

which involves Ghanaian reliance on other nations for economic assistance, goods, and services; 5) unemployment, which has the same meaning as in industrialized nations; and 6) infrastructural development, which involves a lack of social amenities and services such as potable drinking water, health and sanitation, roads and transportation, and schools.

The media agenda, the independent variable, was measured by a content analysis of the coverage of the six problems in one of the largest and most prestigious Ghanaian daily newspapers. Media content was measured five weeks immediately before (July 1 to August 13, 1981) and five weeks immediately after (August 21 to September 30, 1981) the survey. The paper selected, The Daily Graphic, has a circulation of 105,000 and is available throughout Ghana. The selection of the most prestigious media or medium as the media agenda measure in agenda-setting research is common in the United States, where the New York Times is frequently selected as a medium measure, even though its circulation is relatively small compared to many other American
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newspapers and magazines.

Media content was analyzed before and after the survey so inferences could be made about the direction of causation. Correlation, of course, does not by itself show causation, but time
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precedence could be used to infer the direction of causation. If media issue emphasis causes audience issue priorities, then the correlation between the media agenda measured before the audience agenda should correlate higher with the audience agenda than the media
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agenda measured after the audience agenda. A total of 543 stories were examined before the audience survey and 500 were examined after the survey. Media coverage of each of the six problems was rank

ordered based on the amount of weighted column inches in a manner used by Atwater, Salwen, and Anderson to account for media prominence cues such as column inches, inclusion of graphics, and page of first appearance.³³

Researchers have argued that respondents recognize and process these media prominence cues in determining issue priorities.³⁴ Each story was examined by three coders. Stories were coded the way two or all three coders agreed. If none of the coders agreed, the story was not used. The coefficient of intercoder reliability was +.92.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the results for the media agenda before and after the survey. A weakness of this study was the use of only six issues in the agenda, which yielded a low level of statistical power. To account for this weakness, inferences were not drawn from single correlational findings, but from repeated findings of the six variables associated with levels of elitism. While statistical significance was reported, statistical significance alone was not regarded as evidence for agenda-setting. Inferences as to whether the media influence the agenda of elites more than non-elites was inferred by examining the six variables that together comprised the construct of elitism. To infer whether the agenda-setting function existed, both the Spearman-rho rank-order correlations and the difference between the correlations of the audience agenda with the public agenda before the survey (time 1, T1) and the correlation with the public agenda with the media agenda after the survey (time 2, T2) were examined.

Table 1 About Here

Table 2 presents the correlations between the media agenda and the public agenda for the six factors examined in this study. Only the correlations between the media agenda at time 1 with the public agenda (T1) are presented. The correlation between the public and the media agenda at time 2 (T2) can be easily ascertained from the right-hand column which presents the difference between T1 and T2. All correlations are high and a few are statistically significant, yielding limited support for the first hypothesis which maintains that the Ghanaian press set the public agenda in Ghana. Though there was strong correlational evidence for the agenda-setting hypothesis, there was also evidence for the alternative hypothesis.

Concerning the second hypothesis dealing with elitism, five of the factors showed higher correlations for elites than non-elites. With three of those factors--political knowledge, literacy, and newspaper reading--the highest level attained statistical significance. With newspaper reading, which was measured at three levels, there was a clear trend of an increasing agenda-setting effect as newspaper reading increased. The variable of mobility showed no greater evidence for agenda-setting among elites than non-elites.

Table 2 About Here

To test for the direction of causation, Table 2 displays the difference between T1 and T2 correlations. A positive difference means that the correlation between the public agenda with the media agenda before the survey was greater than the public agenda with the media agenda after the survey, and would yield support for the agenda-setting effect. The differences between T1 and T2 in table 2 generally show modest evidence for the directionality of the agenda-setting effect. Most of the differences between correlations are positive, although they are sometimes small. Nevertheless, even non-elites sometimes displayed evidence for agenda-setting. What is perhaps most interesting is that newspaper reading, the one factor relating to elitism in this study that directly involves media use, showed the greatest support for agenda-setting. As newspaper reading increased, agenda-setting increased. What is more, the correlational difference between T1 and T2 was positive for the medium-specific level of this variable, negative for the non-readers, and no difference for the readers. However, all three levels of this variable showed high to very high correlations.

DISCUSSION

Despite the frequently high and sometimes statistically significant evidence for the hypotheses in this study, the results yielded only qualified support for the assertion that the Ghanaian media set the national agenda in Ghana and that factors relating to elitism in Ghana will be positively associated with agenda-setting. There were two reasons for the qualification: 1) correlations between the first media agenda measure with the public agenda (T1) were not

much greater than the correlations between the second media agenda measure with the public agenda (T2), yielding limited support for the direction of causation, and 2) even non-elite audience members frequently showed modest to strong correlations between their issue priorities and media issue emphasis. This might suggest that while media issue emphasis influences audience issue priorities, the possibility that media respond to audience feedback cannot be ruled out. It might also suggest that Ghanaian non-elites may learn about media issue emphasis through interpersonal sources or two- or multi-step flows.

The main qualification against media agenda-setting found in this study concerned the direction of causation. Are the media causing the public agenda or are the media responding to the public agenda, particularly the public agenda of Ghanaian elites? From these limited results, there is some evidence to suggest that the relationship is reciprocal. But the fact that even non-elites adopt media issue emphasis to some extent suggests that newspapers in Ghana may be successful in bringing about national consensus as to what are the most crucial national problems that need to be addressed.

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$$\frac{N_p - (P - 1)}{N_p} \times CI$$

Where: N_p = number of pages in the newspaper

P = page on which the story first appeared

CI = column inches

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Table 1: The Media Agenda

Time 1

ISSUE	Sum of Weights	Rank	n
National Unity	1,462	1	152
Kalabule	1,037	2	164
Infrastructural Problems	746	3	114
Weak Government	609	4	52
Foreign Dependency	358	5	58
Unemployment	44	6	3

			N=543

Time 2

National Unity	1,063	1	110
Kalabule	994	2	141
Infrastructural Problems	847	3	127
Foreign Dependency	648	4	85
Weak Government	384	5	35
Unemployment	19	6	2

			N=500

TABLE 2: Correlations Between the Media Agenda and the Audience Agenda for Factors Relating to Elitism

<u>Factor</u>	<u>Corr (T1)</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Diff Between T1 and T2</u>
<u>Mobility</u>			
Never Travel	.77	424	+.11
Once or Twice Per Mo.	.77	728	+.11
Three or More per Mo.	.77	265	+.11
<u>Political Knowledge</u>			
Know MP	.89*	681	+.12
Don't Know MP	.66	802	+.06
<u>Political Participation</u>			
Participation	.77	1,301	+.11
No Participation	.66	139	+.19
<u>Literacy</u>			
Literate	.89*	668	+.12
Illiterate	.66	783	-.11
<u>Education</u>			
Schooling	.83	629	+.06
No Schooling	.77	763	.00
<u>Newspaper Reading</u>			
Medium-Specific Readers	.89*	263	+.12
Readers	.77	398	.00
Non-Readers	.60	819	-.06

*Statistically Significant at the .05 Level